

INITIATIVE
MATTERS

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Change without pain over the decades

'God's own country' is a much less religious country than it used to be

Election campaigns are not necessarily the best of times to calmly reflect on a nation's direction. While those in government naturally boast about the country's achievements (and make it sound as if they were their very own), the opposition will necessarily paint a much grimmer picture (and ignore its own past contributions to today's problems).

In reality, the overall picture of New Zealand's development is far more nuanced than the impression one might get by listening to our politicians. It is neither all positive nor all disastrous. Not every bit of change is the result of deliberate policy decisions, either. Finally, some of the most profound changes happening in New Zealand's society are happening at such a snail's pace that they do not often make the headlines.

Research undertaken by The New Zealand Initiative has attempted to summarise our political, social and economic developments by digging through scores of time series and statistics. The result, *New Zealand by Numbers*, does not only make for interesting reading. Some of our findings may also surprise people typically well-versed in current affairs.

Population growth

For a start, the changes in the composition of New Zealand's population are substantial. In the 1880s, New Zealand was a country of just over 600,000 people living predominantly outside cities. Not only has the population grown seven-fold since then; the growth has almost exclusively happened in urban areas. Today, with an urban population accounting for 85% of the total, New Zealand is among the most urbanised countries in the world.

Perhaps New Zealanders are even aware of these facts but they have not become part of the national psyche. New Zealand's self-image is not one characterised by life in the cities but by pristine and sparsely inhabited landscapes – even though it has almost been 100 years since rural New Zealanders were in the majority.

Similarly, the widespread use of the phrase "God's own country" may obscure the fact that New Zealand is developing into a much less religious country than it used to be. Whereas in 1936 only 0.3% of New Zealanders declared to have no religion, this proportion has increased to 35% by 2006. For a country that was for a long part of its history shaped by Anglicans, Presbyterians, Catholics and Methodists, this is a massive shift.

What has also changed dramatically in recent decades is the way in which we live together. From a young society with many children, we have not only aged substantially, but the number of children born to families

has also declined. These two factors had the combined effect of shrinking average household sizes. At just 2.6 persons per household today, they are only about half the size of households at the beginning of the 20th century.

Ethnic composition

Also changing is the ethnic composition of New Zealand society. Although the European ethnicity still dominates today, the biggest increases in the past couple of decades have happened within Asian, Pacific and Maori ethnic groups.

It is interesting to note for all these developments (except, perhaps, the urban-rural divide) that they do not seem to have reached their end points yet. We are still at a stage where trend lines indicate that these long-term demographic changes are likely to continue for a long time in which we will get even older, more Asian, less religious, have fewer children and live in smaller households.

Conservatives and traditionalists may object to some or all of these changes. However, there is something

Socially, New Zealand has become a very different country over the past century. This is not a value statement but a statement of fact. There are, however, some developments which are undisputedly positive about New Zealand's development.

New Zealanders are getting healthier and they live longer. For example, the incidents of notifiable diseases have been on the way down for decades, partly due to better immunisation rates. At the same time, tobacco consumption has fallen dramatically, alcohol use is stable, and both maternal mortality in childbirth and neonatal mortality have diminished substantially. Of course, there remain some health issues of concern, not least increasing rates for obesity and mental health related problems.

Another positive to note is the improving level of formal education. Perhaps the clearest indicator is comparing the highest level of education achieved by different age groups. Among older working age people (55-64 year-olds), 36% do not have upper secondary qualifications. The cor-

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very traditional about them: New Zealand has always been changing. There has never been a time when New Zealand society froze and did not develop. However, the change was so gradual that its impact only becomes visible over long time horizons.

A sober look at the statistics also puts some of the most hotly debated political issues into perspective. Take the question of gay marriages and civil unions, for example. Despite all the long and bitter debates about marriage equality, same-sex ceremonies only account for 2% of all marriages. At the same time, if long-term trends are anything to go by, marriage may be on the way out anyway. From a post-World War II peak of 12 marriages per 1000 population, the marriage rate now stands at just under 5.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the divorce rate is also falling – not because marriages are so much more harmonious these days, but simply because you need to be married first before you can get divorced. It also means more children are born out of wedlock and that the expectation of having children within wedlock has practically disappeared as a social norm. This may also be linked to the declining religious influence described above.

responding rate for younger adults (25-34 year olds) is only 20%. At the same time, recently declining results in international education tests show that New Zealand cannot afford to rest on its laurels.

Long-term developments

It is a similar story going through New Zealand's long-term developments in practically every area, whether it is health, education, crime and justice, or the domestic economy. If we are honest, that is, leaving party-political biases aside, we should celebrate the amount of change and improvement that this country has achieved. We should also count ourselves lucky that despite the massive size of some these changes, they have happened almost seamlessly, largely without creating social upheaval or unrest.

There is one thing, nevertheless, which needs stressing. Every achievement is a result of effort and determination. To make this country even better for the future, it will take the same courage and purpose that it took previous generations to build the New Zealand we live in today. If we do not want to fall behind, we cannot afford to stand still.

*Dr Oliver Hartwich is the executive director of The New Zealand Initiative. The Initiative's new book, *New Zealand by Numbers*, is available at www.nzinitiative.org.nz.*